

By Michelle Barclay, Assistant Director, Children, Families and the Courts

“The T case is going so amazingly well which is due to a wonderful cooperation between the agencies and a collaboration which is unlike I have ever seen. As you know the attorney, case worker...everyone has put their heart and soul in this case!!! I tell you this because if you ever need a story about a “cold case” that is an example of what that project can do to change a life then this is one that would bring the house down. I am seeing T right before her 18th birthday in September. She is signing herself back in and I am going to continue seeing her even after that birthday under a code section that allows me to do so.”

Above is a quote from Cobb County Juvenile Court Judge Juanita Stedman about a child identified as a cold case multiple years ago. This child experienced severe trauma in her young life and has had a very hard time recovering. This past year, state monies were appropriated for first time for in the Judicial Council budget to institutionalize the Cold Case Project within our state government. The Cold Case Project is a partnership with the judicial and executive branches of Georgia. The Division of Family and Children Services and the Office of the Child Advocate are the main partners. Ashley Willcott, attorney and director of the Georgia Office of the Child Advocate, has been the Cold Case project lead for the entire life of the five year pilot project funded for the most part by Casey Family Programs.

At its core, the Cold Case Project is a quality review program of children who are “stuck” in the legal limbo of foster care. Georgia’s child welfare data shows that MOST children who come through the foster system do exit to legal permanency. The children’s cases on the Cold Case list found by a predictive computer model have gotten off track for a variety of reasons and the Cold Case team works to fix the problems and to make sure the children’s voices are heard. The lawyer reviewers do this by reading the case from beginning to end and making a summary of what has happened and what should happen next. These are perfect tasks for lawyers, reflects a lot of law school life.

This project was started in the judicial branch for three reasons. First, many judicial decisions have been made on these children already; second, substantive due process issues of the children are at risk of being violated or are in fact being violated in these cases; and third, the judicial branch can more stable for the long term than the executive branch for keeping a project with expert eyes focused on children who are already in the foster care system who may be physically safe, but who are not flourishing. The outcome data shows this project works. This year we learned that the odds of obtaining legal permanency for these children on the list increased to 30% compared to not doing reviews. In addition to the lawyer reviewers, our consultant team includes retired social workers, a private detective, a child psychiatrist, a mediator and others. The average cost for a review is \$700 per case.

Annual reports with outcome data for the past 5 years are available on the JC/AOC website. The most recent annual report can be viewed [here](#) .